

STAFF RECOMMENDATION



S. Dettman

NCPC File No. 6713

WASHINGTON CANAL PARK

Bounded by 2nd Place, SE, and 2nd, I and M Streets, SE
Washington, DC

Submitted by the District of Columbia Office of the Deputy Mayor for
Planning and Economic Development

May 27, 2010

Abstract

The District of Columbia Office of the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development on behalf of the Canal Park Development Association has submitted preliminary and final site and building plans for the Washington Canal Park in southeast Washington, DC. The three-block site encompasses a portion of the former Washington Canal that connected Tiber Creek and the Potomac River with the Anacostia River. The proposed design includes a linear rain garden, combination of large and small open spaces and pavilions, public art, interpretive signage, and a prominent water feature. The linear rain garden will contribute to a larger stormwater management system that will collect, treat, and reuse stormwater runoff from the park and adjacent buildings. At its October 2009 meeting, the Commission commented favorably on a revised concept for the park and requested additional information to be submitted at the next stage of design review. This information has been submitted and has been incorporated into staff's analysis of the project.

Commission Action Requested by Applicant

Approval of preliminary and final site and building plans pursuant to 40 U.S.C. § 8722(b)(1).

Executive Director's Recommendation

The Commission:

Approves the preliminary and final site and building plans for the Washington Canal Park located in southeast Washington, DC, as shown on NCPC Map File No. 41.10(38.00)43074.

Commends the applicant on a simple, flexible, high-quality park design and for providing this much-needed public amenity that will support the continued revitalization of the Near Southeast neighborhood.

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PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Site



Project Area Map

The project site is located on a narrow three-block area in southeast Washington, DC bounded by I Street, SE to the north; 2nd Place, SE to the east; M Street, SE to the south; and 2nd Street, SE to the west. The relatively flat, two-acre park space is divided into three separate blocks by K

Street, SE and L Street, SE. The site is owned by the federal government and is under the administrative jurisdiction of the District of Columbia for recreation purposes. The site is situated in the heart of an area of the city that is experiencing a major revitalization due in large part to the relocation of the United States Department of Transportation (DOT) headquarters, located directly south across M Street, SE, and construction of the new baseball stadium. The land that surrounds the future park is mostly vacant with some development along its western border. However, plans already exist to develop the surrounding land with a mix of uses that will have a high percentage of residential.

Background

The original plan for Washington by Pierre Charles L'Enfant in 1794 included a canal that connected the Potomac River with the Anacostia River. While the original intent of the canal was for the movement of commercial goods between the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers, its use for such purposes was relatively short-lived due to the increasing use of the railroad to transport goods. Eventually, due to the lack of a public sewer system at the time, the poorly maintained and underutilized canal ultimately became a place for residents to dump their garbage and sewage and quickly became a public nuisance and health hazard. Ultimately, the canal was filled in and paved over as part of a large-scale public improvement project during the 1870s. Today, little evidence remains of the original Washington Canal with the exception of the Lock Keeper's house located at 17th Street and Constitution Avenue, NW.

The area where the proposed Washington Canal Park will be located is currently experiencing a major transformation. The relocation of the United States Department of Transportation headquarters, redevelopment of the Southeast Federal Center, and the construction of Nationals Park has spurred the development of several thousand residential dwelling units, several commercial office buildings, as well as retail and entertainment venues. Upon completion, this area is anticipated to become one of Washington's most vibrant neighborhoods with Washington Canal Park serving as a social nexus and community gathering space.

The National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC) reviewed the original concept design for Washington Canal Park in November 2006. NCPC commented favorably on the overall design concept and commended the design team for their dedication to using Low Impact Development (LID) design strategies in order to minimize the effects of stormwater runoff. The Commission recommended that the design be simplified and that consideration be given to materials and elements that would be more durable and require less routine maintenance.

At its October 2009 meeting, the Commission commented favorably on a revised concept design for Washington Canal Park, and commended the applicant for its use of the linear rain garden to collect, treat, and reuse stormwater runoff, and as a tool to educate the community on environmental issues and the historical significance of the site. The Commission also recommended that the applicant incorporate interpretive signage to further describe the historical significance of the park site as it relates to the Washington Canal. Finally, the Commission requested the following at the next stage of design review:

- Additional information on the intended programming and monitoring for both levels of the south pavilion.

- Further developed designs for the three pavilions including materials and lighting scheme.
- Additional information on the Low Impact Development strategies and other sustainable features within the park.
- More fully developed streetscape designs at street edges and crosswalks.
- Lighting design that is complimentary to the surrounding neighborhood, and minimizes spillover and visual impacts to adjacent streets and development.
- Information on long-term plans to operate and maintain the park including the organizations and partnerships that will be involved.
- Information on how Washington Canal Park contributes to the interconnected system of parks and open spaces within the District of Columbia.



Project area showing existing and planned development types that immediately surround the site

Proposal

The proposed design for Washington Canal Park will transform this three-block site into a vibrant community focal point that will provide a much needed recreational amenity to this burgeoning mixed-use community. The design takes into consideration the present and future needs of those that live, work, and visit the surrounding neighborhood, while at the same time creatively incorporating elements of the site's historical significance. Through a range of programming including a restaurant with outdoor seating, an interactive fountain, flexible open space, a seasonal ice rink, and a children's play area, each block will possess its own unique identity that will accommodate a wide-range of activities. A linear rain garden, a reference to the former canal, will tie each of the three blocks together into one cohesive experience. Three pieces of public art, one in each block, will also help to tie the blocks together. Since the park

will be constructed well in advance of the full build out of the surrounding community, a key design consideration was the need to create a destination that is flexible enough to accommodate the change that will unquestionably occur in the years to come. Therefore, although the spaces allocated throughout the park respond to specific program requirements defined by stakeholder input, they have been designed in a manner that allows them to remain flexible and able to accommodate change.



Final design (June 2010)



Concept design (October 2009)

The Southern Block (Block One)

The design for the southern block is largely unchanged since the Commission reviewed the concept design in October 2009. It is still considered the most “urban” of the three blocks and is anchored by a significant, interactive water feature, large pavilion, and an ice skating rink in the winter. The water feature will be designed in a manner that will allow the space it occupies to be used as a performance area when the fountain is turned off, or as a seasonal plant display in the winter months. The block will also contain a large, two-level pavilion that will serve as a café and observation area for people to relax and look out over the park. The pavilion is situated along the eastern side of the block at the terminus of a linear rain garden that runs along the entire eastern length of the park. Immediately west of the pavilion is a large, open air plaza that can be used for a wide-range of formal and informal activities. Movable tables and chairs can be placed in this area to provide seating for visitors and patrons of the café. Immediately north of the plaza, shade trees, plant beds, and a curvilinear pathway provide a less urban feel and begin the

transition to the next block. Within this plant bed will be located the first of three pieces of sculpture which will be discussed further later in this report. In addition to the aforementioned sculpture, additional seating that is sculptural in and of itself has been incorporated along the southeastern edge of the block. The seating consists of a continuous, curved bench that varies in height as it wraps around this corner of the block. In addition to providing seating at a variety of heights, which can accommodate a range of visitor preferences, the meandering form of the bench will also provide an interesting aesthetic element and help define the southern edge of the park. Finally, during the winter months the fountain area, plaza, and northern pathway will be transformed into an ice skating rink with loops at the north and south ends of the block.



Final site plan of southern block (Summer months)



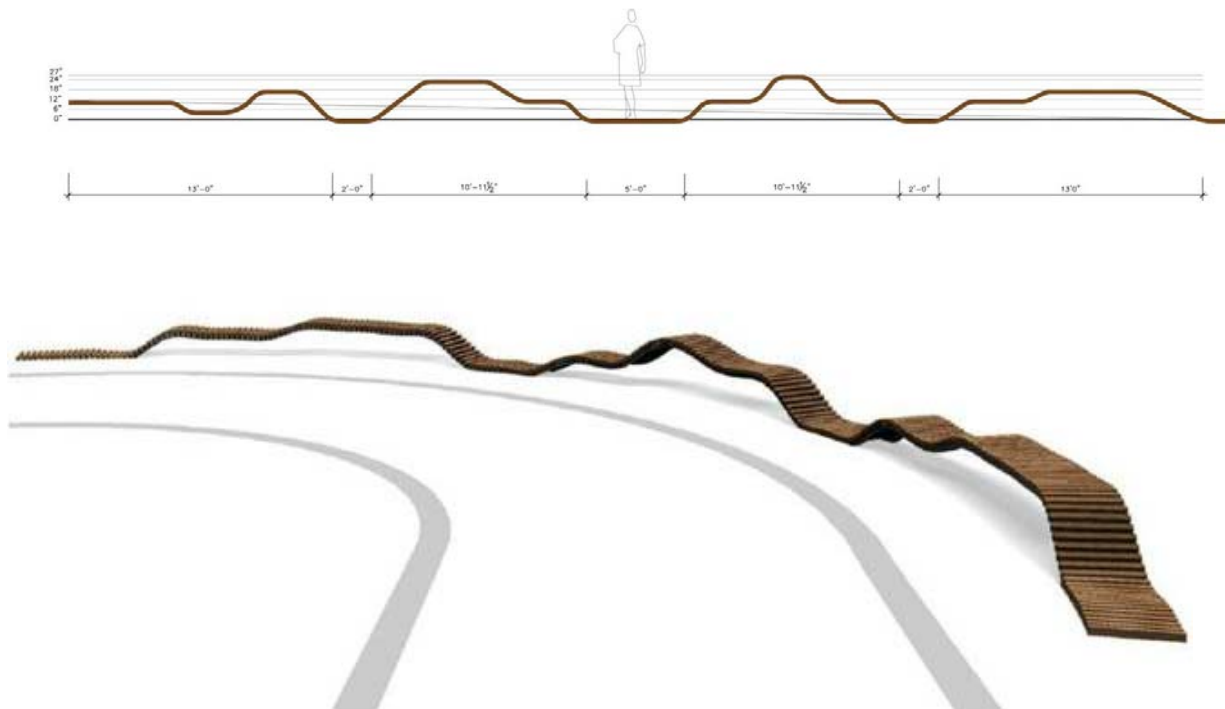
Final site plan for southern block (Winter months)



View of interactive fountain and south pavilion (looking northeast from 2nd and M Streets)



View of ice skating rink and sculpture (looking south toward M Street)



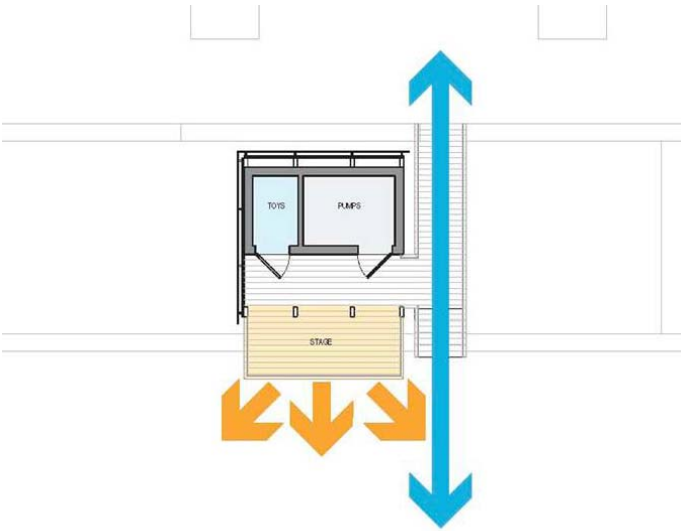
Profile and rendering of sculptural bench within the southern block

The Middle Block (Block Two)

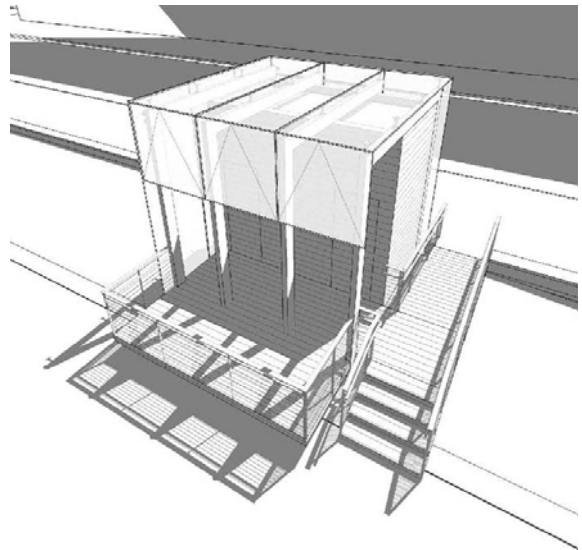
The design of the middle block continues to serve as a transition from the harder surfaces of the southern block into the greener, park-like setting of the northern block. The small pavilion planned for above the linear rain garden and cascading fountain has been modified since the original concept design. As originally proposed, the pavilion will continue to serve as a bridge from the sidewalk into the center of the park, provide storage for the children's play area, and house mechanical equipment associated with the fountain. In addition, the footprint of the pavilion has now been expanded slightly along the west side to accommodate a small performance stage. The small panel of lawn opposite the pavilion remains, although its form has been modified slightly and is also the location of the second sculptural element. In contrast to the concept design this area no longer has a rectangular shape, and instead has an angled northern edge that relates to a pedestrian path that continues to the north edge of the block. This slight change in shape, together with minor alterations to landscaping, has strengthened the relationship between the lawn area and the pavilion. The small lawn area continues to be surrounded by seating on three sides to provide people a place to relax during their lunch break. The bench also provides a nice enclosure to allow this area to be used as a children's play area. To the north, a larger, flexible lawn area provides space for informal gatherings.



Site plan of middle block



Revised plan of middle block pavilion showing stage



Rendering of middle block pavilion (looking east)



Examples of seating proposed for block two





View of linear rain garden along east side of middle block



View of children's play area and sculpture

The Northern Block (Block Three)

The northern block of the park continues to be the most pastoral given the large, open lawn panel that encompasses a sizable proportion of the block. A slight grade change from north to south will make this area perfect for the congregation of significant numbers of people to enjoy summer movies and concerts. Placing a stage or movie screen at the southern end of the block will allow the gently sloping lawn to act as an informal amphitheater; providing a place for people to stand or sit with unobstructed views. The third sculptural work is also proposed to be located at the north end of the lawn area. The location and programming of the third pavilion remain unchanged from the previous concept design. Located along the northern end of the linear rain garden, the pavilion will be used to rent folding chairs to park visitors during non-winter months. North of the lawn panel, the park transitions back to meet I Street, SE in a more urbane fashion with a bosque of trees set in stone enclosures.



Site plan of northern block



Example of seating proposed for block three



Type of activity planned for block three



View of north block pavilion



View of north block central lawn area

The Linear Rain Garden

The three blocks of the park will be tied together by a rain garden running north/south along the park's eastern edge. The garden will function as a stormwater collection basin by filtering and directing runoff from the park, and the roofs of future adjacent buildings, into an underground storage tank. This water will be used to fulfill the majority of the park's irrigation demands. The types of plantings used within the garden will be representative of the ecological succession of plant communities. Plants will range from open water aquatic species in the southern block, edge condition species in the middle block, to forest species in the northern block. Finally, from a historical standpoint the garden is an acknowledgment of the former canal that once occupied the site. The long, linear shape of the garden references the canal's form. The three pavilions that punctuate the garden are an extrusion of this form, and also represent abstractions of the boats and barges that once plied along Washington's canal system.



Cross-section of linear rain garden at middle block

Public Art

One of the most notable changes made since the Commission reviewed the concept design is the incorporation of public art throughout the park. Composed of metal sculptural works by the artist Daniel Hess, the underlying theme of the art can be described as a curling “tube” or “thread” that ties the individual blocks of the park together underground, while extending above ground in three unsuspecting locations. Though the design of the sculpture is simple, it is not overly simple that it will go unnoticed. Rather, it should successfully add yet another element of aesthetic interest to the park while respecting the overall simplicity of the park's design. In addition, it is likely that visitor's will physically interact with the sculpture due to its design and anticipated location.



Representative models of proposed public sculpture



Thematic diagram and locations of proposed public sculpture

Signage

Multi-use as well as interpretive signage has also been incorporated into the final park design. Consistent with the Commission's recommendation at the concept stage; three interpretive exhibitory signs will be located along the linear rain garden. These signs will serve to educate park visitors on the historic significance of the project site. In addition to the three interpretive signs, four multi-use signs will be installed to help visitors make their way through the park and nearby surroundings. These signs will combine a park map, park rules, and other park-related information.



Proposed design of interpretive and multi-use signs

Sustainable Design Strategies

The applicant is pursuing a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Gold rating with aspirations of attaining LEED Platinum. Most impressive of the many sustainable design strategies incorporated into the final park design is the extensive stormwater reuse system. Through the use of the linear rain garden and Low Impact Design tree pits, almost all of the stormwater runoff generated by the park will be captured, treated, and reused to satisfy up to 95% of the park's irrigation needs. In addition, the stormwater reuse system has been designed to a capacity that can collect site runoff and rainwater falling on the roofs of up to five buildings surrounding the project site. Other environmentally sensitive design strategies that have been incorporated into the final park design and will contribute to the park's LEED rating include: electric charging stations for up to 34 parking spaces, bike racks for up to 80 bicycles, reflective paving to reduce Heat Island Effect, native plantings, and energy efficient site lighting and mechanical systems

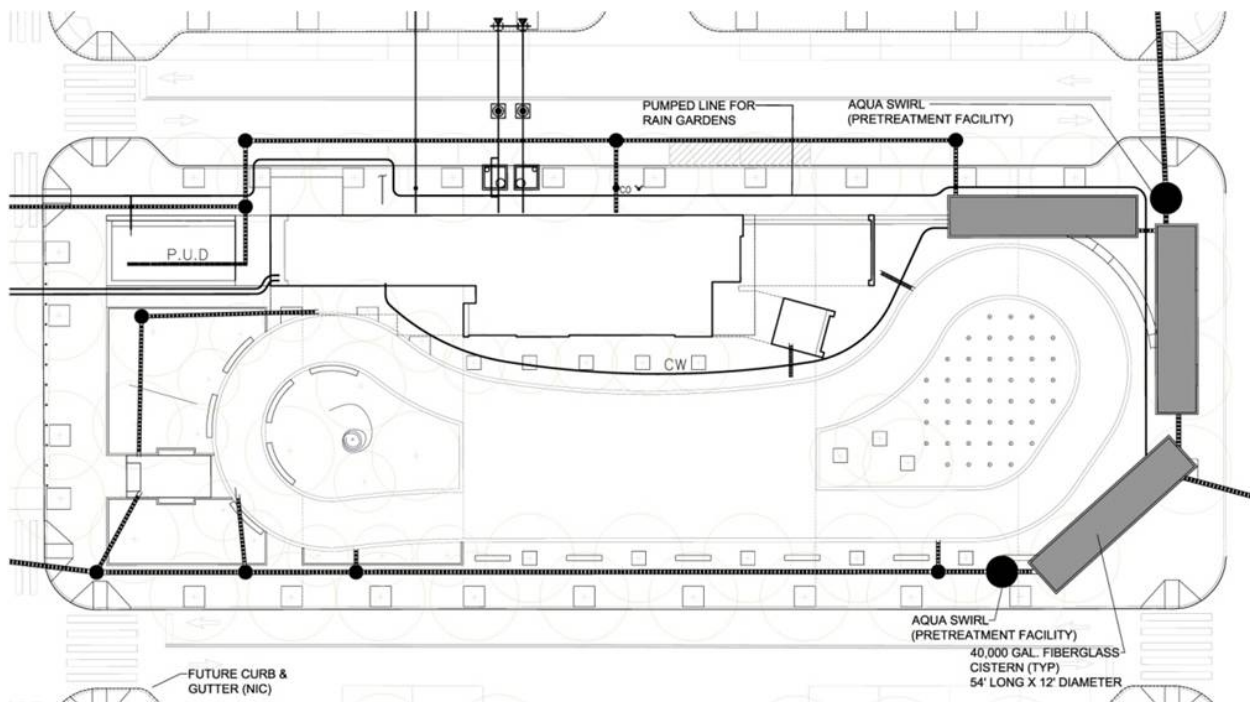


Diagram of planned stormwater reuse system (southern block)

PROJECT ANALYSIS

Executive Summary

Staff has completed its review of the final design for Washington Canal Park and commends the applicant for its work toward providing this much-needed public amenity that will undoubtedly support and strengthen the continued revitalization of the Near Southeast neighborhood. Upon completion, the park will likely become a highly sought after place for visitors, workers, and residents of this burgeoning mixed use neighborhood. The applicant has worked diligently to

prepare an overall design that is simple, while still providing a wide range of activities and amenities. Staff finds the intended use and programming of each block to be well thought out and accommodates the needs of all park users. The applicant's use of the linear rain garden and public art to physically, aesthetically, and symbolically tie the three blocks together will certainly aid in making the park a success. In addition, staff commends the applicant for its dedication to advancing sustainability in the urban environment by incorporating a robust set of environmentally sensitive urban design strategies. Finally, staff appreciates that while the new park design is distinctive and will likely set a new standard for future parks in the District of Columbia, it does so by acknowledging and building upon the unique historical significance of the site and its surrounding neighborhood.

The applicant has provided all of the additional information requested by the Commission at the concept review stage. Staff has reviewed this information and incorporated it into its report to the Commission. In addition, the applicant has also considered all of areas that staff recommended for further exploration at the concept stage. Included below is a discussion of those areas that staff considers to be key to the future success of the park.

Impacts to Views Along Historic L'Enfant Streets

While the success of Washington Canal Park is to some degree dependent upon seamlessly integrating three separate city blocks into a unified whole, it is important that this be done in a manner that does not result in unnecessary intrusions into the historic L'Enfant rights-of-way that exist within the project area. Staff is pleased to see that the final design of the park respects the surrounding L'Enfant streets by maintaining their width, visual openness, and function as pathways for all modes of transportation. Staff considers these rights-of-way very important elements to defining the overall form of the park and its relationship to its surroundings. In addition, keeping these portions of the city's street network open to all modes of transportation will add to the vibrancy of the park, and avoid the possibility of creating traffic problems elsewhere in the neighborhood.

Park Maintenance

Maintenance of the site will be of utmost importance for the park to become a true social nexus for residents of the community and those that work in the area. To ensure the successful long-term operation and maintenance of the park, the applicant has entered into a 20-year license agreement with the Canal Park Development Association (CPDA). During the license period, CPDA will be responsible for general oversight and reporting to the District, and will manage contracts with entities responsible for different aspects of maintenance and programming. For example, the Capital Riverfront Business Improvement District (BID) will manage basic maintenance such as lawn mowing, cleaning, trash removal, fountain maintenance, and security. The BID will also program events in the park such as movies, concerts, holiday festivals, etc. A pavilion operator is anticipated to manage the restaurant located in the south pavilion; another independent operator will manage all functions of the ice rink such as maintenance, skate rental, and ice resurfacing. Funding for park maintenance will come from several sources including \$5 million maintenance endowment, pavilion lease income, and income generate from operation of

the ice rink. Staff commends the applicant for its efforts to assemble maintenance and operations plans well in advance of completing construction of the park.

Pedestrian Safety and Accessibility

Due to the different programmatic elements distributed throughout each of the three blocks, pedestrian safety while moving between blocks will be very important. The final park design includes crosswalks that are clearly marked for pedestrians. Pathways throughout the park make access to these crosswalks convenient and easily accessible. In addition, paving that may have a different color or texture is proposed between the crosswalks along K and L Streets, SE, which will serve as an effective means of traffic calming.

CONFORMANCE

Comprehensive Plan for the National Capital

The final design for Washington Canal Park is not inconsistent with the Federal Elements of the Comprehensive Plan for the National Capital. The project advances the policies contained within the Parks and Open Space Element as they pertain to the establishment of new parks that augment the city's current system of parks and open spaces, and the maintenance and use of small urban parks to hold special events, display civic art, and create focal points to encourage informal gatherings.

Monumental Core Framework Plan

Although Washington Canal Park is technically outside the study area of the Monumental Core Framework Plan (Framework Plan) it does advance some of the Framework Plan's guiding themes and strategies that are applicable to the city as a whole as sound planning and design principles. The project is consistent with the Framework Plan's recommended strategy of creating an interconnected open-space network that establishes walkable links among parks and plazas, and the provision of multi-purpose spaces that can accommodate events and recreation. Like the Framework Plan, the project also recognizes the importance of promoting environmental sustainability in the urban environment through the use of LID techniques; and strategies that improve stormwater management, improve urban habitats, and increase the tree canopy within urban areas.

CapitalSpace

The project is consistent with several of the Center City Park recommendations contained within CapitalSpace. These recommendations encourage the expansion of programs and amenities; use of public art, landscaping, and outdoor seating to connect activities in parks to adjacent neighborhoods; and the use of sustainable design features in new and existing parks. The CapitalSpace initiative also recommends the use of increased signage, promotions, and programming to build an understanding and appreciation of park and neighborhood history. The final design for Washington Canal Park successfully incorporates all of these recommendations.

CONSULTATION

Coordinating Committee

The Coordinating Committee reviewed the proposal at its May 12, 2010 meeting, and forwarded it to the Commission with the statement that the proposal has been coordinated with all participating agencies. The participating agencies included: NCPC; the National Park Service, the General Services Administration; the District of Columbia Office of Planning; the District Department of Transportation; the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority; and District of Columbia Fire and Emergency Medical Services.

U.S. Commission of Fine Arts

At its meeting on April 15, 2010, the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts (CFA) reviewed and approved the final design for the proposed Washington Canal Park stating that “the park will be an exciting catalyst for growth in a redeveloping neighborhood.” CFA expressed appreciation for the applicant’s exploration of a new paradigm for parks in Washington, though continued to express concern about the project’s overall complexity and the necessary commitment to ongoing maintenance. Finally, CFA questioned the design of the proposed benches, noting that the variety of forms contributes to the complexity of the park and that the location of some benches could interfere with planned programming.